



Journal des anthropologues

Association française des anthropologues

142-143 | 2015

Marges et Numérique

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A24 Média*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jda/6298>

DOI: 10.4000/jda.6298

ISSN: 2114-2203

Publisher

Association française des anthropologues

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 October 2015

Number of pages: 253-278

ISBN: 979-10-90923-10-2

ISSN: 1156-0428

Electronic reference

Kani Tuyala, « Free flows and contra-flows of information: the Kenyan online media agency A24 Media », *Journal des anthropologues* [Online], 142-143 | 2015, Online since 15 October 2017, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jda/6298> ; DOI : 10.4000/jda.6298

FREE FLOWS AND CONTRA-FLOWS OF INFORMATION: THE KENYAN ONLINE MEDIA AGENCY A24 MEDIA

Kani TUYALA*

The aim of this paper is to discuss how modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is appropriated and implemented by Kenyan media entrepreneurs who created the pan-African online media agency Africa 24 Media in September 2008. The underlying attempt behind A24 Media is to give 'Africans' a voice, whereby it is now a widely accepted fact that the portrayal of 'Africans' in North American and West European media to this day remains very restricted and one-dimensional. What therefore appears as a 'free flow of information' is in fact more of a one-way flow from North to South. Too often stories about the African continent and its inhabitants are dealing with topics such as starvation, corruption, disease, war, or any kind of exotic curiosities. Not only are the resulting stereotypes affecting the perception of the African people outside the continent, leading to prejudices and even far-reaching results like racism, but also the inner-African communication process remains limited, biased and distorted due to the lack of media self-representation. Both realities have multiple

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social and economic effects, leading for example to a lack of pan-African social and economic integration and foreign investment.

This paper embeds the discussion about the Kenyan media company A24 Media into inter-disciplinary considerations surrounding the alleged free flow of information – now more than ever being proclaimed in times of modern communication technology. In this context, it is noteworthy that in the 1960s and 1970s new technologies were regarded as tools to foster the dissemination of information, raising hopes of increased social and economic development: “[...] satellite technology was regarded as an innovation that would foster greater diversity in the media and provide improved and lower-cost access to communication services and an array of new telehealth and education services” (Mansell & Nordenstreng, 2007: 16).

The question therefore arises if such optimism is justified *this* time due to contemporary ICT and its unique characteristics.

The core interest of this paper will question if the ‘digital age’ indeed supports the establishment of what Daya Kishan Thussu refers to as “contra-flows, originating from the erstwhile peripheries of global media industries [...]” (Thussu, 2007: 4). Or will this new technology finally help to reinforce North American and West European media hegemony by means of its global dissemination and local adaptation? To approach the described epistemological interest this paper will focus on A24 Media, a media company located in Nairobi, Kenya and raise questions about possible social, political and economic implications of such contra-flows.

The abovementioned considerations culminate in the theoretical assumption that if one wants to answer questions regarding the possibilities, challenges and limitations of ICT as a tool of local socio-economic transformation and self-representation in an African context, one also should reconsider a one-dimensional perspective of culture as a self-contained entity. Culture appears not as cataleptic but as a permeable, ever changing body; not afflicted by outside influences but rather dependent on fertile exchange. Culture is a perpetual process of negotiations of meaning,

significance and substance, constituting antagonism between representations of identity and disparity. This takes place in a permanent flow of contradictions, breaks, disparities and resistance within all inter-human relations and therefore also within local and trans-local power relations (Schlehe, 2005).

This paper is based on ethnographic methodology, mainly in-depth interviews on the ground and via e-mail, document collections and online resources. This research was conducted from 2010 to 2014¹.

Kenya steps into the virtual age

Without modern digital technology A24 Media would not be able to operate, however, how did the ICT landscape in Kenya develop in recent years? According to Internet World Stats (2011) there were 200 000 Kenyan Internet users in the year 2000, and the number of subscribers increased “with an estimated monthly growth of 300 new subscribers each month” (*ibid.*). Between 2000 and 2012, however, the situation changed dramatically. During one of the interviews with Dr. Bitange Ndemo, who at that time was head

¹ During the practical fieldwork periods, the interview partners were the following:

- AMIN Salim: chairman of A24 Media.
- FURNAD Daniel: COO and senior executive producer of A24 Media.
- KARIKU Sarah: A24 Media/Camerapix editorial manager.
- KIRUBI Christopher ‘Chris’: CEO of Taco Tiger Industries, CEO of Capital Media Group Ltd, chairman of DHL Kenya, owner of International House Kenya.
- MAINA Macharia: *Africa Journal* host, A24 Media senior correspondent.
- MURIITHI Roseline: A24 Media content manager.
- NDEMO Bitange (dr.): at that time permanent secretary of the Kenyan Information and Communication Ministry, director of the Communication Commission of Kenya, board member of the Postal Corporation of Kenya, Telkom Kenya, Kenya Film Commission, Kenya ICT and lecturer at the university of Nairobi.
- SHEIKH Asif: president of A24 Media.
- Dr. ZEPPEFELD Werner: Former WDR foreign correspondent.

of the Communication Commission of Kenya (CCK), he also referred to the number of Internet users in Kenya:

About three years ago we had only three million users. The constraint then was broadband. The undersea cables landed, then we rolled out the national fiber optic network, the terrestrial network. Mobile operators brought in 3G. The number of users has changed to 12.5 million – that’s incredible. The current constraint actually is what we call ‘last mile connectivity’ [meaning to bring the Internet to all corners of Kenya, including rural and remote areas], and that’s what the government is working on to roll out².

There are four main cellular mobile service providers in Kenya: Safaricom, Airtel, Telkom Kenya (Orange) and Essar Telkom. According to the CCK: “Safaricom Limited, Airtel Networks Kenya Limited and Telkom Kenya Limited (Orange) continued to demonstrate an upward trend in subscriptions” (Communication Commission of Kenya, 2013: 9).

Concerning the Internet’s impact on Kenyan society, Dr. Ndemo had the following to say:

Previously leaders would just ignore the people and it’s not going to be like that anymore [...] That transparency, that is what is going to help. You can’t hide things anymore [...] If you are hoping to lead a country and hide information like it used to be you are in deep trouble³.

It would seem that, after all, the Internet is about to change Kenyan communication habits in a fundamental and far reaching way. Asked whether Internet technology, as an adopted and allegedly North American technology, could also have a subtle but far reaching negative impact on Kenyan culture(s), Dr. Ndemo replied:

I know what you mean by that, but I know even technology can be traced back [to] [...] (and) started in Africa. I don’t think there is any

² Ndemo B., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), October 27, 2011.

³ Ndemo B., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), October 27, 2011.

culture that would say this is a western technology, we can't use it [...] There is no tradition that does not require exchange⁴.

In stating the above, Dr. Ndemo also ultimately challenged some distinctive beliefs about globalization as a linear process. Indeed, he indirectly addressed a “conceptual weakness” (Förster, 2005: 39, translation KT) in the ongoing debate about globalization. According to Förster: “‘Adoption’, but also its complements ‘overpowering’ and ‘hybridization’, presume that initially there existed two clearly varying units. Only then does it make sense to speak about an adoption of a certain good, an idea or an institution of one by others” (*ibid.*).

It therefore seems questionable whether such “clearly varying units” ever existed, notably if one assumes that culture is in fact based by its very nature on adoption, also as “there is no tradition that does not require exchange”. Dr. Ndemo therefore indirectly also argues against the danger of being “overpowered”:

[...] Even though there will be some differences also, where people would tend to live more like the western world, but I think there is going to be a much stronger move to dig deeper and re-create our own culture [due to and through the use of ICT]⁵.

With regard to one of the underlying objectives of this paper, namely to examine the question of whether the Internet (as was ascribed to earlier forms of media such as television) might also contribute to some form of “cultural imperialism” (Hafez, 2005; Schiller, 1976: 9), Dr. Ndemo stated that:

What people discuss is local content [...] Probably what can give you a different view is YouTube, because you are able to share local news worldwide. And I've seen various Kenyan clips from very rural places and the Kenyans in the US, who are very far away, are able to see that. So the models are changing. The western influence was a one-way influence. I would say in the next few years there will be a

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ndemo B., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), October 27, 2011.

lot of influence even from developing countries, depending on their level of understanding of the Internet⁶.

Dr. Ndemo further argued: “I don’t think you can fully westernize the African people⁷”.

The statement by Dr. Ndemo in particular reminds of Kai Hafez’s criticism of the term ‘media globalization’, when he asks “Is the Internet then a ‘global’ or is it in fact more of a ‘local’ medium”? (cf. Hafez, *op. cit.*: 10). Ndemo stresses the fact that even though people all over the world can access information from every corner of the globe, the communication traffic within national borders nevertheless exceeds transborder information traffic.

Concerning the question of whether Internet technology will be able to contribute to a significant decline in poverty in Kenya, A24 Media president Asif Sheikh argued that technology is not an end in itself and that its impact on society rather depends on its usage, whereby concerning the corresponding technology’s distribution he adds for consideration “[...] and who are the guys who bring this stuff in? The Chinese”⁸.

The Flow of Information’s social and economic implications

It is claimed that from the middle of the last century, the world has been largely mediated through the eyes “of American owned news organizations” and furthermore “Hollywood films, with considerable assistance from the Motion Picture Export Association, [has] saturated the world’s movie screens⁹ (Schiller, 1989: 141). It can therefore be argued: “[...] that the transnational corporations, with the support of their respective governments, exert indirect

⁶ Ndemo B., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya, October 27, 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sheikh A., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 27, 2011.

⁹ Herbert Schiller argues, “If the goal of modernization was the consumer society, the United States provided the model, and the American mass media celebrated and promoted it” (*ibid.*: 141).

control over the developing countries, dominating markets, resources, production and labour. In the process they undermine the cultural autonomy of the countries of the South and create a dependency on both the hardware and software of communication and media" (Thussu, *op. cit.*: 19).

Thussu's argument complements the observation that the free flow of information is rather a one-way flow from North to South, and that it is only now, due to the emergence of modern ICT, that previously marginalized societies are obtaining the tools to establish what he refers to as contra-flows in the global media landscape.

With regard to the consequences of the predominantly negative coverage of Africa, the media analysis Dutch scholar Teun A. Van Dijk provides solid examples of the reproduction of major bias and in fact racism within mass media, when elaborating on their subtle role in preserving a certain balance of power in international political, economic and social relations. In his paper entitled 'Power and the news media' van Dijk argues "The media have played a crucial role in the reproduction of the ethnic status quo as well as in the perpetuation of racism and ethnicism" (van Dijk, 1995: 17-18). He continues by stating: "It is not surprising that, as a result of such coverage, the white readers get a seriously biased version of ethnic affairs. Because the average readers lack access to alternative definitions of the ethnic situation, and because alternative interpretations are hardly consistent with their own best interest, they will generally accept such mainstream definitions as self-evident. Conversely [...] the press will again use such popular resentment as support for its own coverage" (*ibid.*: 20-21).

According to van Dijk, the lack of a vibrant pan-african media landscape nevertheless fostered the international status quo: "Due to the absence of Third World news agencies and a lack of correspondents for Third World newspapers, most news about these countries, even in their own newspapers, is channeled through First World news agencies and inevitably shows a Western perspective [...] this white, Western perspective prefers news events that

confirm stereotypes tailored to the expectations of Western readers” (*ibid.*: 26).

Van Dijk continues by arguing that even though the coverage of Africa might have seen some slight changes in recent years, it still differs quite sharply from the portrayal of other world regions, especially when events such as hunger, oppression, violence and war occur. In that case, however, the anglo-american and west european mass media are: “[...] play[ing] down the direct or indirect effects or legacies of Western colonialism, corporate practices, military intervention, international trade, and politics. On the other hand, Western aid and other contributions are emphasized and presented as beneficial and seldom as problematic” (*ibid.*).

In an economic context the current single-sided coverage of Africa is therefore also regarded as a key “blockage to change” (Abbot & Phipps, 2009: 6). This blockage refers to the effect that negative stereotypes have on the decisions of foreign corporations, politicians, potential investors and tourists. Concerning the aspect of inhibited investment due to negative coverage, it appears noteworthy that: “While Africa, according to the US Government’s Overseas Private Investment Corporation, offers the highest return in the world on direct foreign investment, it attracts the least. Unless investors see the Africa that is worthy of investment, they won’t put their money into it. And that lack of investment translates into job stagnation, continued poverty and limited access to education and health care” (Pineau, 2005: B02).

Former US ambassador to Tanzania, Charles Stith, stated the following to say concerning the correlations between media, economic power and racism: “One thing blocking a fuller perception of Africa’s progress may be implicit racism. There is a historic framework that by definition sees Africa [...] and Africans as inferior and negative and makes most stories about the continent negative. By contrast, China has problems, but we see and hear other things about China. Russia has problems, yet we see and read other things about Russia. That same standard should apply to Africa” (cited in Olujobi, 2006).

Stith is accompanied by Paul Kagame, the current Rwandan president: “The constant negative reporting kills the growth of foreign direct investment. There has even been a suggestion that it is meant to keep Africa in the backyard of the global economy” (*ibid.*).

The wheel has finally come full circle, as negative media coverage leads to less investment, lack of investment leads to stagnation in terms of poverty reduction, and evident poverty serves to further the argument for single-sided storytelling and the feel-good reports of ‘helping Africa’. Nigerian Journalist Gbemisola Olujobi, a Pulitzer Fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication (University of Southern California), describes the underlying singularity as “disaster pornography” (Olujobi, *op. cit.*). It can therefore be argued: “A robust and independent Africa-wide media which can project an indigenous understanding of Africa both to its own people and to others beyond the continent will aid the development of a more stable, prosperous and confident Africa” (Fiske de Gouveia, 2005: 7).

With this in mind, it seems reasonable to point out that: “The Western public (or audience) needs to be exposed first-hand to Africa, and thereby reduce their dependency on Animal Planet, Discovery Channel or Disney World to inform their perception of Africa” (Michira, 2002: 7).

A24 Media and the Ethiopian famine

The conceivably most significant reason for the creation of A24 Media is the legacy of Mohamed ‘Mo’ Amin, the founder of Camerapix, today one of the most established multimedia companies on the African continent, and father of Salim Amin, the co-founder of A24 Media. A24 Media’s photography website describes Mohamed Amin as one of “the most famous photojournalists in the world”. His impact is described in the following way: “In a career spanning more than 30 years he covered every major event in his native Africa and beyond, to emerge as the most decorated news cameraman of all time. His story is inseparable from the chronicle of Africa. A friend of princes and paupers, kings and commoners, Mo

did not suffer fools gladly, and was never less than passionate in his life's work"¹⁰.

Amin earned his highest international reputation during the Ethiopian famine of 1984, a crisis that inspired the 'LiveAid' initiative, which found its peak in the charity hit single 'We are the world' starring celebrities such as Michael Jackson, Harry Belafonte and Stevie Wonder. Concerning his father's role in creating international awareness of the Ethiopian famine, Salim Amin stated in an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2007, that the images his father took of the famine "[...] changed the world". They prompted the greatest act of giving in the 20th century [...] More importantly, they saved the lives of more than 3 million people (Amin, 2007: 1).

Why is this episode important enough to describe it here? Because, despite the global wave of solidarity Mohamed Amin's coverage of the Ethiopian famine generated, the following quote from Salim lies at the heart of understanding the ambition that led to the establishment of A24 Media: "There has been much talk about the damaging impact of the stereotypical portrayal of Africa in the media. The photos my father took still represent much of what people think of Africa, reflecting the typical images of Africa that we continue to see on international news channels – starving children with flies in their eyes, executions, genocide. Overcoming these stereotypes is one of the key challenges that we in Africa face. We can only combat that trend if we have true influence on what is reported, covered and said about Africa" (*ibid.*: 2).

Considering why the Ethiopian famine gained adequate international media attention only late in its course, the Glasgow University Media Group, in their volume *Getting the Message. News, Truth and Power*, explains that: "Even if we assume that television needs terrible pictures to generate interest this still does not seem altogether credible as a reason. For example, when

¹⁰ Cf.: Africa A24 Media: *Photography*: <http://photography.a24media.com> (re-accessed July 12, 2014).

television news wishes to stress the impact of strikes, they have used library film of previous disputes to show the consequences of industrial action [...] before the alleged effects have actually occurred. By the same token, it would have presumably been possible to use library film of the previous Ethiopian famine and to say that this was about to happen again unless something was done to stop it. But featuring a huge potential disaster in the Third World does not warrant the same research and commitment needed to illustrate much smaller potential problems at home. This is not always the fault of individual journalists in the field – it is more to do with the priorities set by the organizations within which they work” (Philo, 1993: 100).

The media response surrounding the Ethiopian famine can be seen as one of the decisive events contributing to the founding of A24 Media. In this sense, Salim Amin aims to fulfill his father’s lifelong vision to show a more holistic picture of African reality; a wish that he himself was unable to accomplish due to the intrinsic mechanisms of the international media landscape that demanded first and foremost for more of the same one-dimensional stories.

A24 Media. An African Voice telling the African Story

In December 2005, Salim Amin and Asif Sheikh’s (A24 Media chairman president respectively) initial attempt at founding a media start-up was to work on the launch of the first pan-African 24 hours news channels. However, they soon came to realize that their primary vision would have to be postponed due to the exorbitant financial and organizational hurdles involved. After some time of reflection about the most suitable business model, Africa 24 Media, a precursor to the envisioned channel and Africa’s first online agency for pan-African video and stills content, was launched on September 19, 2008. Their website describes the initiative as follows: “A24 Media is a pan-African online media agency that

connects the rest of the world with content production resources and information from and about Africa”¹¹.

Asif Sheikh explains how it came about that he and Salim Amin worked together to start A24 Media. According to him, they were originally high school classmates, and “[...] when I came back home [to Kenya] after twenty years [...] he basically approached our family to invest [...] and we said, yeah we’re interested”¹². Sheikh believes that as business partners, they complement one another, as he brings in “[...] the whole business expertise, how to run a business, how to structure a business, how to manage customers”, while Salim “[...] obviously does have the media experience, he does have the brand, he is fulfilling his father’s footsteps [...] Salim’s ambition has always been to take his father’s [Mohamed Amin] legacy and build his own legacy”¹³. He continued, saying that what finally motivated him to establish A24 Media together with Salim Amin was his realization “[...] that there was a business here that if you control content [...] the limit could be the sky.” He further added, “Salim’s vision, which I liked to see happen, is to [...] make it something for Africans by Africans”¹⁴.

The A24 Media business model

In January 2011, A24 Media and Camerapix, the above-mentioned multi-media company founded by Mohamed Amin in 1963 and now led by Salim Amin, had twenty-three journalists and media professionals in its employment. However, it was due to the efforts of Salim Amin and Asif Sheikh, the two main initiators, that A24 Media became operational in the first place. In the same period of time, the number of freelance journalists associated with

¹¹ Cf.: A24 Media: *About us*: <http://www.a24media.com/about-us/> (February 18th 2013, re-accessed July 12th 2014).

¹² Sheikh A., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 27, 2011.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

A24 Media sending material on a daily basis was 250 from forty different countries (in East, West, Southern and North Africa).

One centerpiece of A24 Media's business model can be described as "content aggregation"¹⁵, though there are different types of content being aggregated. Since 2011, the range of content has further widened to include (among others) short features, long form content and documentaries. In recent years, A24 Media has also started to produce its own content in the form of shows and series, though content aggregation "is still the main business"¹⁶. The aggregated material is either entirely produced by A24 Media staff or is based on material sent in by freelance journalists – or 'stringers' – from across the African continent, which is then edited by A24 Media. These freelance journalists range from those trained by A24 Media itself, those who are entirely self-taught or those who gained their training from other sources. The most important and striking difference between the A24 Media model and the usual corporate media model is that the journalists who work for them retain the copyright for their own material and receive a revenue share of 60/40 in their favor. Asked in 2011 about whether this model had paid off so far, Salim Amin replied:

Yeah, we broke even five months ago, we're not losing money anymore. We're still a long way from recovering our investment, but yes, I think the model is working because the content is moving, because there are so many new [African] channels coming up, they are all taking the same content, so we can make the same sell several times. The initial marketing has been done and now it's about people to pick stories up¹⁷.

Concerning copyright, the experiences of Salim Amin's father again came into play, as he was always keen to keep the copyright for the content he produced. Asif Sheikh explained the core model

¹⁵ Amin S., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 27, 2011.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

for the relationship between A24 Media and their freelancers by stating that for both parties it is a win-win business:

For example, when a freelancer sends us a story, we want the freelancer to understand that ‘Listen, you take the ability and the time to shoot a good story and send it to us and we sell it to ten different broadcasters and you guys get 60% of that revenue, you own your kid, right. Now what you’re going to do, you send us more stories’. We’re doing it in support of each other [...] In Africa it’s a massive problem. Freelancers go and shoot something, then go to Reuters. Reuters pays them a hundred bucks [Dollars]” and then owns the content outright¹⁸.

For Asif, the 60/40 model therefore “[...] is more than just making money. It’s also about showcasing to the world that Africa has the ability”¹⁹.

The overall business model of A24 Media is two-fold: on the one hand it is about aggregating, producing and selling content to broadcasters, and on the other hand it aims to “monetize the audience” (getting visitors to the website to engage in financial transactions). Asif felt that it was this latter aspect that “[...] is going to be our big picture on really making money”²⁰. During one of the interviews, when speaking of the different pillars on which the business model is founded, Asif referred to this combined approach as an integrative model.

Completing his explanation of how they were planning to make A24 Media a success story, Asif summed up A24 Media’s strategic advantage:

So I think we’re optimistic now [...] Let me repeat, there is nobody doing what we’re doing, which is basically aggregating content and trying to sell it [...] You know you have the Nigerian guy doing Nigerian movies and just trying to sell Nigerian movies. That’s the challenge, because Africa is such a big continent and it’s a very difficult market to execute²¹.

¹⁸ Sheikh A. Interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), November 8, 2010.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Reuters and A24 Media's Africa Journal

The history of *Africa Journal*, an about twenty-six minutes long weekly journal, also goes back to Mohamed Amin who had the initial idea for a program concentrating on the positive aspects of Africa. According to Roseline Muriithi from A24 Media, the production is now (in 2014) twenty ears old, thus *Africa Journal* was established in 1994²². Later on, Reuters took over the program after the passing of Mohamed Amin in 1996 and embedded it within their own Africa programming. The coherences become clearer, when taking into consideration that during the time Mohamed Amin established *Africa Journal* he used to work for Visnews, which again “later became part of Reuters, thus the reason they kept it [*Africa Journal*] when Mohamed died”²³. In reference to why Reuters then finally came back to A24 Media to ask them to produce *Africa Journal*, Furnad replied:

What happened is, Reuters showed some intent that they might prefer to have a company that has television production experience and a television production future to take over the program, and the logical first place to stop was where it started²⁴.

Cooperation between Reuters and A24 Media began in February 2011, when A24 Media took over exclusive responsibility for producing *Africa Journal*. In explaining the character of the cooperation, Asif Sheikh stated that Reuters constitutes “the biggest partnership” for A24 Media, and that “because when we got that partnership, instead of just being a content aggregator we are now a content producer”²⁵. Asif Sheikh also talked about the strategic advantages for A24 Media in the collaboration with Reuters, in particular their access to Reuters’ stringer network:

²² Muriithi R., e-mail interview by author, October 16, 2014.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Furnad D., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 27, 2011.

²⁵ Sheikh A., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), October 5, 2011.

So how it relates to stringers is that we now have bought into the family of all the Reuters stringers, because we're working with them to produce this show. With that also are our own stringers. So the model for stringers is, I can't give you an accurate number, as it's an ever expanding model and something I think [that] can become very valuable as time goes on, because we have a network like nobody else on the continent²⁶.

In addition and in contrast to Reuters, A24 Media is currently enlarging its African capacities and activities, and "[...] because we're doing all these things, we can effectively be a marketing arm for this program and potentially for further Reuters products in the future"²⁷. Furnad compared Reuters' outsourcing of *Africa Journal* with a similar move by Associated Press Television News (APTN), which, according to him, bought Worldwide Television News (WTN) [in 1998] also to get "[...] rid of the whole programming division"²⁸. Furnad further argued that APTN, at that time still Associated Press Television, had "decided that they only wanted to concentrate on news coverage and not post-production and putting things together, because that requires facilities, requires special expertise, etc"²⁹.

He also provided some additional information about the number of journalists involved in producing *Africa Journal*:

Between ten and twelve in any one week, but of course, you know, you have people in the field, you know, other people are doing special projects because we do have quite a lot of projects going on; So ten to twelve, but probably not all the same week. Probably we have a core of six working on the show³⁰.

Beyond the journalists who are directly involved in the production of *Africa Journal*, Daniel referred to others who have an

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Furnad D., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 27, 2011.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

impact on the production³¹, such as staff working at the assignment desk who help contact contributors to send their stories. When asked about the character of stories produced for *Africa Journal* Furnad stated:

Anywhere from [...] how the financial crisis in Europe and America was affecting Africa, to the Zambian presidential elections, to [an] African comedy festival here, etc. [...] Generally there is a hard news [piece] first, a very light one to the end, but in between you probably find things that are interesting and unique [...] and interesting ideas are coming to us from our contributors³².

Africa Journal is distributed to thirty-three countries in Africa, forty stations worldwide (in the US and UK via the Africa Channel) and as of January 2015 the number of *Africa Journal* episodes produced by A24 Media reached one hundred fifteen. Inquiring after the concrete business model guiding the relationship between A24 Media and Reuters, Asif Sheikh stated that in return for producing stories for Reuters, A24 Media receives a production fee. When an *Africa Journal* episode is produced, A24 Media and Reuters both act as distributors and sellers of the show and in case of successful sales, A24 Media and Reuters share the revenue³³. In 2014, Roseline Muriithi also provided some additional specifics about the revenue share model between A24 Media and Reuters, by stating that both entities split revenues on a 50/50 basis on any new clients³⁴. Daniel Furnad also referred to the revenue share as the basic business model between them. Following Furnad's argumentation, the model of a revenue share deal makes sense for Reuters, since by outsourcing production they save pecuniary resources, though they

³¹ The *Africa Journal* team basically consists of 8 A24 Media producers, 4 cameramen, 4 editors, 2 sound technicians, 2 interns – not all working permanently or only for *Africa Journal*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Sheikh A., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 27, 2011.

³⁴ Muriithi R., e-mail interview by author, October 16, 2014.

still earn money as *Africa Journal* ultimately remains a Reuters product³⁵.

Faces of Africa. A24 Media goes China

Just as China appeared as an influential player all over Africa in recent times, it is also playing an ever growing role within A24 Media's business strategy, in the form of the Chinese state run television channel China Central Television (CCTV). As of September 2012, according to Macharia Maina, A24 Media had produced twenty documentaries for CCTV³⁶. Furthermore, what is so far unique in the partnership between A24 Media and CCTV is the fact that the latter does not solely buy stories produced by A24 Media, but they also ask A24 Media to suggest stories to be broadcasted by them. Daniel Furnad explained the logic and benefits of their cooperation with CCTV when he spoke of how CCTV had decided that they wanted to do a pan-African series of documentaries, *Faces of Africa*, and finally approached A24 Media to produce it:

[...] because there are a lot of production companies here, but you look on their website and you see it's all Kenyan stuff. Where do they (CCTV) get [a] four part series on Mandela from? Where do they get [stories on] Ghana from? So, we [at A24 Media] got a pan-African range. So if we're smart about things we can make the needs of our various customers work for us³⁷.

Aside from the concrete relationship between both entities, the underlying question about the Chinese government's motivations for establishing a CCTV bureau in Nairobi on January 11, 2012 relates to the paper's overriding discussion about the so-called free flow of information, and the interests that determine and impact upon this flow, in both the past and present. In this sense, CCTV could be

³⁵ Furnad D., interview by author. Tape recording. Nairobi (Kenya), September 9, 2012.

³⁶ Maina M., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), September, 2012.

³⁷ Furnad D., interview by author. Tape recording. Nairobi (Kenya), September 9 2012.

regarded as an emerging competitor to the status quo of international media flows and their rather unilateral control mechanisms and subsequent socio-economic impacts. According to Ronald Yick, a Hong Kong based blogger, stated in an article for the website Global Voices entitled “Chinese ‘Soft Power’ Expands in Africa with CCTV”: Nowadays, many western media and observers believe that the presence of CCTV in Africa is to expand the Chinese government’s soft power and compete with media giants in the West, such as CNN and BBC (Yick, 2012). In fact, Thussu also makes use of the term soft power, from a different perspective though. He argues that: “The extensive reach of US-based media, advertising and telecommunications networks contributes to the global flow of consumerist messages, helping the US to use its ‘soft power’ to promote its national economic and political interests” (Thussu, *op. cit.*: 13).

Inquiring about their thoughts on whether China is using media for the purpose of achieving economic influence through the soft power of media, everyone at A24 Media agreed with the notion that China, just like West European and North American states, might ultimately aim to serve its own national interests. They pointed out, however, that the Chinese approach to portraying Africa in their media – with CCTV being the example at hand – is nevertheless notably different. In this regard, it would seem as if China’s economic interests in Africa call for media coverage of the continent that justifies its investment. According to A24 Media representatives, it is due to such reasoning that the Chinese – and therefore CCTV – are interested in presenting a more positive perspective on Africa. As Content Manager Roseline Muriithi confirmed, the Chinese “want documentaries that showcase the positive side of Africa”³⁸. Asking in September 2014 how many stories A24 Media had so far produced for CCTV, Asif Sheikh replied, “by end of this year [there] will be 80”³⁹.

³⁸ Muriithi R., e-mail interview by author. October 16, 2014.

³⁹ Sheikh A., e-mail interview by author. September 13, 2014.

As the paper primarily concentrates on *Africa Journal* and Faces of Africa to provide insight into A24 Media's inner processes, coherences and collaborations, it has to be taken into consideration that A24 Media does also partner with several other broadcasters, media agencies, mobile phone operators, corporate clients and documentarians/filmmakers. In 2015 they started to produce further half-hour shows such as '*Africa meets Business*', '*On the Road*' and '*The Scoop*' (a talk show hosted by Salim Amin). With regard to A24 Media's further partners, the most important ones for whom it produces content are Bloomberg TV Africa, TVC (TV Continental of Lagos, Nigeria) and Arise TV (founded by Nigerian media entrepreneur Nduka Obaigbena and launched in 2013). Salim Amin elucidated:

We have subscription deals with TV-Continental in Nigeria, Bloomberg Africa, Arise TV, and we sold to individual stations like Nation⁴⁰ [...] the subscription deals they take are 15 [reports] a month, others have been single sales, because they were interested in a particular story. So there are a few one-time clients, but the majority has been on these subscription contracts, to Bloomberg Africa, which is primarily business stories, TV-Continental is a cross-section of stories⁴¹.

Publishing limitations for this paper, however, do not allow describing and reflecting on A24 Media's further collaborations and their intrinsic characteristics.

Conclusion

As was shown in the previous paragraphs, ventures such as A24 Media are emerging in an environment (still) mostly dominated by West European and North American media companies, however, the paper sheds light on the fact that media companies like

⁴⁰ The Nation Media Group (NMG) was "founded by His Highness the Aga Khan in 1959 [and] has become the largest independent media house in East and Central Africa. It has been quoted on the Nairobi Stock Exchange since the early 1970s" (Nation Media Group 'Homepage').

⁴¹ Amin S., e-mail interview by author. September 13, 2014.

A24 Media have the potential to act as a perception corrective, not only for recipients outside of Africa, but also for African recipients themselves. According to Kai Hafez, “In other words: glocalization can in the long run foster the local culture and is not inevitably a step on the way towards a global ‘super culture’” (Hafez, *op. cit.*: 27, translation KT). An attempt to re-imagine the continent by appropriating modern communication technologies thus seems reachable, though this potential can only unfold when companies such as A24 Media gain and maintain a certain degree of market penetration or when the consumer is willing to actively use and purchase their products to challenge the uniformity of information about Africa. This uniformity can be regarded as the result of the “market psychology of (West European and North American) media representatives”⁴², which in turn corresponds to the analysis that “journalism is in an increasingly precarious situation, whereby it has marginalized itself within the scope of market logics and political compliance” (Van Raden & Jäger 2011: 7, translation KT). Van Raden and Jäger continue by stating: “I am worried about the question why – despite tremendously huge media diversity, quantitatively speaking, despite the mountains of newspapers, magazines, despite all the radio and TV stations and the fabulous opportunities of the Internet – there is often so much breathless simplicity. Why media coverage so often follows a simple basic narrative, whereby it so readily becomes entangled in its own clichés and legends” (*ibid.*).

Salim Amin made some reference to such findings and critiques. He outlined that modern communication technology can serve as a transformative medium in a social and economic sense; however, during our interview he also reflected on the broader picture, stating:

The Internet has the potential when the people put their stories on. However, you know, the problem with the Internet is people have too much information, unless you know how to search the Internet,

⁴² Zeppenfeld W., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), September 30, 2010.

unless you know where to look. The more you have, the easier it is to lose things, and this is something that we really have to think about, how useful the Internet really is. I mean, the blogging scene has come along with the Internet, but how many people read those blogs? Unless it is something like Huffington Post or something that is established⁴³.

In fact, by stating the above, Salim Amin to some extent also questions the Internet's transformative (political) character, in the sense that it might foster or even initiate democracy or democratic movements, for instance. In this context, Hafez argues that the Internet's supposed potential to allow whole new strategies for political opposition due to the fact that content can be written in English – but also many other languages – and thus lead to worldwide attention “is an integral part of the mythologization of globalization” (Hafez, *op. cit.*: 155, translation KT). Referring to Dana Ott and Melissa Rosser, Hafez states that there is no (scientific) evidence supporting the assumption “that the Internet is accelerating democratization processes. Democratization probably rather facilitates the Internet's development instead of the reverse” (*ibid.*: 154). At this point, as has also been stated further above, the habits of media consumption also play a crucial role and according to Dr. Ndemo:

That is what we are working on, to provide local content, because that is what people have most interest in. So what you are going to see is a boom in local content websites and that's what is going to become the attraction for the people locally⁴⁴.

Currently, there seems to exist a certain momentum supporting such an assumption. Dr. Ndemo again:

[...] because (of) the crisis you see in Europe, even Africans are beginning to ask themselves, ‘should we do the same and get into the same crisis?’ The support system we had, the sort of socialist system we had [...] We normally say in Africa: A child is not brought up by

⁴³ Amin S., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), January 28, 2011.

⁴⁴ Ndemo B., interview by author. Audio recording. Nairobi (Kenya), October 27, 2011.

the parents but by the community. So should we go back to our system where the community raised the children, which meant they were brought up with proper values, respect, culture and everything? These are the things people are beginning to ask. Did the Europeans go too far?⁴⁵

In fact such kind of glocalisation, a reversion to the local in times of the global fostered by an increased pan-African circulation of locally generated digital content, could then also foster an “Africa rising”.

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⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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Summary

The paper aims to contribute to the discussion about the alleged free flow of information and the emergence of so called contra-flows of information at the former absolute periphery of media production – Africa. The global flow of information, still foremost dominated by Anglo-American and West

European media ventures, coupled with a deficiency of 'Third World' media self-representation and the corresponding structures, has multiple social and economic consequences, resulting, among others, in an insufficient pan-African integration, an international restraint concerning foreign direct investment, stereotyping and racism. To approach the described epistemological interest this paper will focus on A24 Media, a multi-media company located in Nairobi, Kenya and raise questions about possible social, political and economic implications of such contra-flows.

Key-words: free flow of information, contra-flows of information, ICT for development, media and racism, hybridization, media globalization

Résumé

Flux libre et contre-flux d'informations : l'agence kényane de médias en ligne A24 Média

Cet article cherche à contribuer aux échanges autour de la prétendue libre circulation de l'information et de l'émergence de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler des « contre-flux » informationnels issus de ce qui fut la périphérie absolue de la production médiatique : l'Afrique. La domination des entreprises médiatiques anglo-saxonnes et européennes sur la circulation des informations couplée à la carence des formes d'auto-représentation du tiers-monde et la déficience des structures appropriées ont de multiples conséquences tant sociales qu'économiques. Cette situation a entraîné, entre autre, une faible intégration panafricaine, une limitation notable des investissements financiers, la circulation des stéréotypes et le racisme. Pour analyser ces enjeux épistémologiques, cet article étudie une agence multimédia à Nairobi, A24 Media, et interroge les conséquences sociales, politiques et économiques potentielles de ces « contre-flux » informationnels.

Mots-clefs : libre circulation de l'information, contre-flux informationnel, technologies de la communication appliquées au développement, média et racisme, hybridation, globalisation des média.

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